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Photos Show No Evidence of POWs, Gritz Tells Panel

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WASHINGTON—Retired Green Beret Lt. Col. James G. (Bo) Gritz told Congress Tuesday that photographs he had brought back from his POW hunt in Laos show no evidence of any American prisoners of war.

Gritz said he is convinced that "at least 50" Americans are being held in Indochina—at least 10 of them in Laos. But he conceded that his belief is based on little more than a verbal report from an anti-communist Laotian guerrilla and the readiness of the guerrilla commander to commit his troops to attempt a rescue.

"I have the same evidence, sir, that might be presented by a clergyman that God exists," Gritz told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee. "To come out with a statement here and say, 'Yes, if you were to call a secret session, I could pull a rabbit out of my hat or pocket'—the answer is no. I don't have a rabbit there. I don't have a POW. . . .

"Again, it's like religion. It all adds up to the probability that God is there."

The 44-year-old former Army Special Forces officer from Los Angeles, who led patrols into Laos three times in the last four months to search for the Americans he believes have been imprisoned since the Vietnam War, was described by government witnesses as a man of baffling methods whose efforts seem like a parody. But Rear Adm. Allan G. Paulson, chief of Pentagon intelligence gathering, conceded that he did not directly tell Gritz to stop.

Ann Mills Griffiths, executive director of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, told the panel that Gritz's missions into Laos "jeopardize legitimate efforts" to obtain "the fullest possible account-

ing" of the nearly 2,500 Americans who never returned after the fighting in Indochina. But she said she doubts that Gritz raised many false hopes among family members.

Gritz recommended turning the accounting task over to civilians because the American military officers in charge are banned from operating on the Laotian border. He also said the United States should admit owing reparations. "Whatever the price tag for the release of American soldiers asked to fight in their country's interests," he said, "our government should commit itself to the path of negotiating that price."

As for himself, Gritz said, he would only "take under advisement" any direct government request to halt his missions—and then only if the government itself was taking action to locate and rescue any Americans in captivity. He expressed reluctance to turn over all of his information to government intelligence agencies. "What I am willing to do," he said, "is to see what they are going to do . . . whether or not they just intend to file it away."

When Gritz returned earlier this month from his most recent mission into Laos, he said he had brought back photographs taken by an agent in resistance forces led by Gen. Kham Bou Pimasen, a neutralist who opposes the communist Laotian government. Gritz said the officer had reported seeing Americans in caves with wooden floors and being transported in covered trucks.

"I've looked at the film, and I find nothing there that would provide any useable evidence at this time," Gritz said. "I must say that it has not been processed into 8-by-10s, but only proofs. . . . It may very well be that later we'll suggest something that you can use. We will examine carefully all the photographs and make those that are appropriate available."

Gritz blamed the lack of evidence

in the photographs on poor lighting and an improper shutter speed.

What, asked Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D-N.Y.), the subcommittee chairman, did Gritz see in Laos that convinced him Americans are being held?

"First of all, I saw a commander in Laos who was willing to mass his force and put it under extreme danger of annihilation," Gritz said, adding that he and two other Americans on his team accompanied Kham Bou's guerrilla force to within a day's march of the purported POW camp before a concentration of Pathet Lao troops forced Gritz to call a halt.

"Was there anything else?" Solarz asked.

"Seeing the truth in the eyes and the face of the (Kham Bou) agent as he reported," Gritz replied.

Gritz cited several instances of government involvement in his rescue efforts since he began mounting the missions four years ago and said he had gotten a "prearranged position" with Hughes Aircraft Co. in Culver City, Calif., which allowed him to travel freely.

But under persistent questioning from subcommittee members, Gritz conceded that he had arranged the Hughes job himself, without help from anyone in the government.

Paulson, in charge of intelligence collection management for the Defense Intelligence Agency, said his organization "does not encourage or support private efforts."

He told the subcommittee that his agency has received 484 reports of POW sightings. Of those, Paulson added, 268 have been dismissed.

Of the remaining 216 reports, lie detector tests were administered in 36 cases, he said, and no deception was indicated in seven. He refused to say publicly whether any of those seven reports have been otherwise confirmed.

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